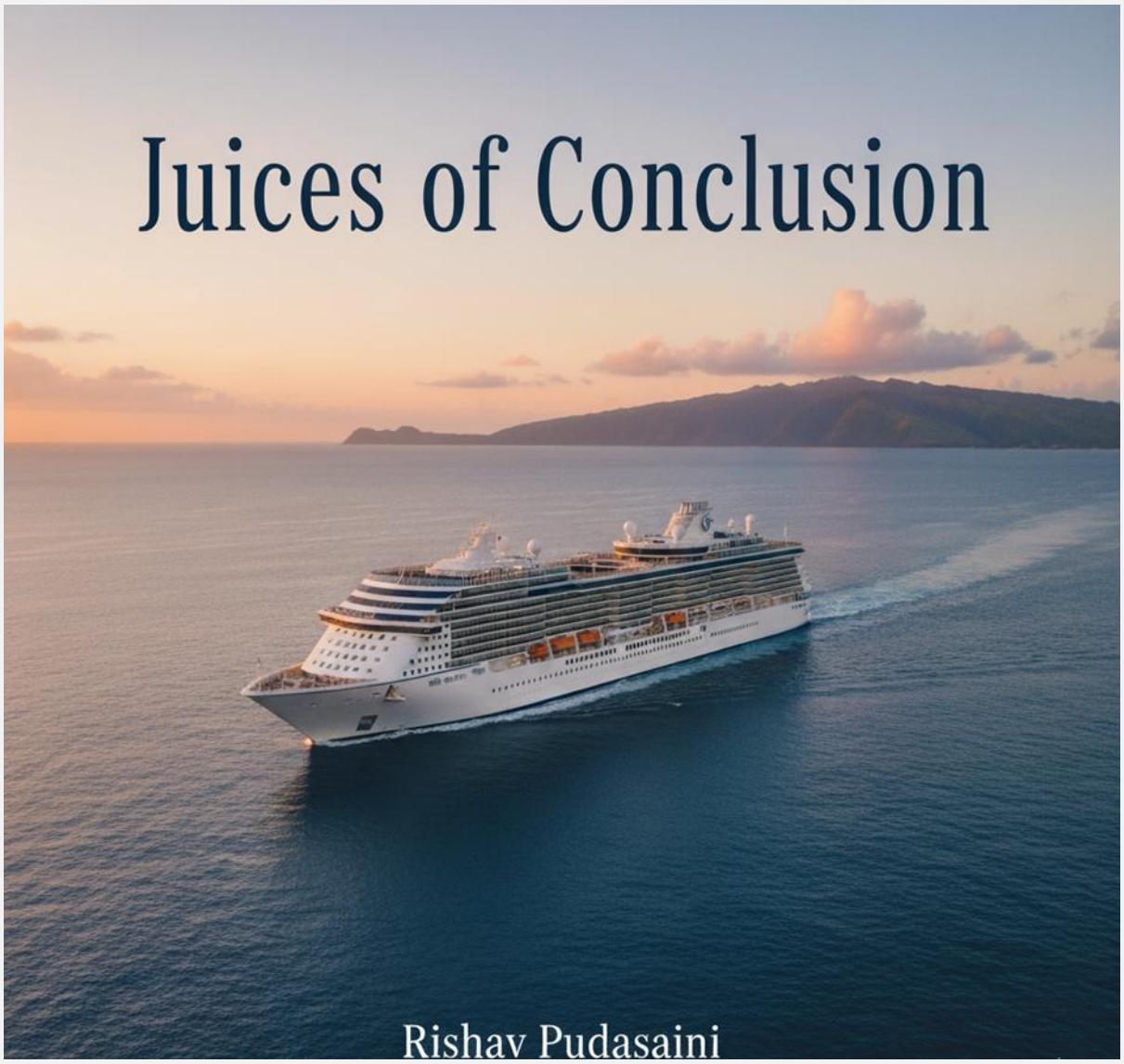
JUICES OF CONCLUSION

(THE FIRST VOYAGER)



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Author……. *Mr. Rishav Raj Pudasaini*

Sub Authors: *Pranit Adhikari*

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Acknowledgement

First, I want to thank myself — because no one really believed this story would make it this far, but I did. I had faith when no one else did, and I never gave up.

A huge thanks to my friends who read, reviewed, and supported me through it all. Your words and encouragement meant more than you know.

And to anyone who's ever thought of quitting — remember, sometimes believing in yourself is enough.

— Rishav Pudasaini

Juices of Conclusion

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Written in: Nepal

To those who feel their childhood never arrived, and to those still searching for their real story.

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EMBRACE THE FICTIONAL STORY OF LOVE ON A TRIP WITH NISKARSHA, RAUFELZA, NICK, JOHNSON, DAVID, PREM, ARYA.

. To those who feel their childhood never arrived, and to those still searching for their real story.

. JUICES OF CONCLUSION.

They say childhood is the sweetest chapter of life — a time of freedom, laughter, and memories that stay with you forever. But for me, childhood was nothing more than a locked door. Whenever people talk about their happiest moments, I fall silent, because my own memories are like shattered glass — sharp, scattered, and impossible to piece together.

I've often wondered why I can't relate to those who speak of playing in open fields, laughing around dinner tables, or falling asleep to bedtime stories. Maybe it's because, while others were running beneath the sun, I was trapped in a small, cage-like room — isolated, hidden, and forgotten.

It's not that my parents are strangers to me. They exist in my life, but never in my memories — at least not the sweet ones. I try to search for a moment of warmth… but there's nothing. Only cold walls and unanswered questions.

Writing these down feels like opening an old wound, but it also brings clarity. For years, I thought something was wrong with me — that I was broken for not feeling what others feel. But now I understand. My childhood wasn't stolen it simply never arrived. And maybe, just maybe, this is where my real story begins.

After all the chaos of my childhood and countless days swallowed by loneliness, I finally decided to escape — if only for a little while. I packed my bags, hoping that distance could reduce the heaviness inside me, and I set off on a trip.

I didn't know it then, but that journey would change something deep within me. Everything about the trip felt like a breath of fresh air — the endless horizon, and the comforting thought that, for once, I am far from the walls that had caged me for so long.

And yet, the real reason this trip became unforgettable wasn't just the breathtaking beauty of Hawaii or the freedom I felt beneath its sunlit skies. It was someone — my co-passenger. A stranger at first, yet somehow the beginning of a story I never expected.

He was a boy who was absolutely silent.

There was something in his eyes distant, unreadable as if he held a story the world wasn't meant to know. He told me his name was Niskarsha, though I sensed immediately it wasn't his real one as a flicker passed through his eyes when he said it, like a secret he wasn't ready to share. But then he admitted, and told me, that he would never use his previous name again — ever. I hesitated to ask why, as something in his voice warned me to leave that silence untouched.

Later, as we stood together at the open back deck of the moving cruise, the wind of the ocean around us made my curiosity grow stronger. I finally asked, "So… what do you do, Niskarsha?"

He turned, smiled widely and replied, "I'm an IT technician." Before I could respond, he quickly shifted the focus. "And you? What do you do?"

I paused, for no reason at all, before answering, "I'm a corporate lawyer."

"That's great," he said softly, Then, with a casual tone, he asked, "Who are you here with? You seem… alone."

I hesitated but finally admitted, "Yeah… I came alone."

Before boarding, I had seen him with someone — a young woman helping him with his bags, and the thought lingered in my mind. So, I asked, "I saw you earlier with a lady… how come you're alone now?"

He paused for a moment, then replied, "Oh, her? That's my cousin's sister. She was just helping me with my luggage."

Something about his tone felt… off, like there he was hiding something beneath the surface. I forced a polite smile, pretending to believe him, but inside, my thoughts were spiraling.

Meanwhile, as the cruise travelled steadily toward its destination, we found ourselves at the very top deck, standing at the back balcony where the ocean flowed endlessly beneath us.

I stood there, gathering every ounce of courage to speak, but he seemed completely elsewhere. Niskarsha was leaning against the railing, his eyes were fixed on the moving water below, as though the ocean was whispering secrets only, he could hear.

"Niskarsha," I said softly.

No response.

I hesitated for a moment, then called again — this time louder, enough to pull him back from wherever his thoughts had taken him. "Niskarsha!"

He blinked for a second, and finally turned his head toward me, his expression was unreadable.

"Oh! Sorry," he said with a faint smile, breaking the silence. "It's just that… sometimes I overthink situations, even beyond their boundaries."

Before I could respond, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a small card, and handed it to me. "Here," he said simply, his voice unusually light, almost… excited. I looked at the card, trying to understand what it meant, but before I could ask or figure out anything, he was already moving away, disappearing into the crowd of people on the deck.

Completely confused, I stood there for a moment, still trying to make sense of the situation. Finally, I headed toward the dining area, hoping to spot him again. The cruise was alive with energy — laughter, chatter, and the endless buzz of spring vacationers eager to spend their holidays in Hawaii. The dining hall was overflowing, packed with people celebrating, drinking, and making memories.

I searched every corner, weaving through crowds, but he was nowhere to be found. Minutes turned into hours, and frustration slowly replaced curiosity. Eventually, giving up, I walked back toward my cabin, the card still clutched tightly in my hand… though I hadn't dared to turn it over yet.

By the time I reached my cabin, I was completely exhausted. My head was buzzing with unanswered questions, and full of frustration I opened the door and slammed it shut behind me.

Collapsing onto the couch, I let my body sink into the cushions, trying to calm the chaos in my mind. When I was lying on my couch, that's when I heard sharp knock on my door. Then, I dragged myself to the door and pulled it open — only to find a young man standing there, dressed neatly in the cruise's uniform. He looked no older than twenty, with a polite smile and a silver tray balanced perfectly in his hands.

"Good evening, sir," he said softly. "I'm Nick. Someone asked me to deliver this to you."

On the tray was a chilled jar of orange juice. I was completely confused. "I… I didn't book a VIP cabin," I said.

Nick's polite smile didn't vanish. "I'm afraid I can't say, sir. I was only told to bring this to you."

Before I could ask anything else, he bowed slightly, turned on his heel, and walked down the hallway. I stood there frozen, the door half-open.

And in that moment, a strange thought crept into my mind — who had sent it… and why?

Things were getting stranger by the hour, and my mind couldn't keep up at all. After a while, I decided to head to the dining area, hoping food might quiet my restless thoughts. Unlike earlier, many of the benches and tables were now empty, and I settled into one.

Just then, from the corner of my eye, I saw Niskarsha walking toward the hallway. My heart skipped a beat. Without thinking, I hurried, taking three quick bites in one go and leaving my plate half-finished as I made my way after him.

By the time I reached the hallway, I spotted him leaning casually against the wall in one corner, a thin trail of smoke curling from the cigarette in his hand. He looked lost in thought.

In a soft, hesitant voice, I called out, "Niskarsha… where have you been?"

He didn't respond and just exhaled a cloud of smoke and kept his eyes fixed on the floor. I stepped closer, holding up the card he had given me earlier. "Why did you give this to me?"

He finally looked at me and told, "I… want to stay in touch with you, even after this trip," he said simply. "That's why."

Something in his tone was sincere, and for the first time since meeting him, I felt a quiet warmth over me. I sat down beside him on the cold metal bench, the silence between us somehow comfortable now.

After a moment, I looked at him carefully and asked, "Something terrible has happened to you… hasn't it?"

He took another drag from his cigarette, his voice was low as he replied, "Not for a long time now."

I hesitated, then gently asked him again, "Can you… tell me about it?"

He turned to me with a faint smile "Too early," he said softly.

Embarrassment rushed through me, and I was about to stand and leave when his voice stopped me.

"Not today," he said. "I want to be happy… at least for this trip."

And somehow, I couldn't walk away. So, I stayed there, sitting beside him for a while.

Over time, we started to settle with each other, exchanging small jokes and yapping about almost everything ridiculous we could think of. For the first time since boarding the cruise, I felt lighter and comfortable.

Somewhere between our scattered conversations, Niskarsha mentioned casually, "I have four family members… but honestly, I only consider my parents as my real family."

His words caught me off guard. I hesitated, then asked softly, "So… you have siblings?"

He adjusted his tie, his movements were precise before replying in a calm tone, "Yes, I do. But he's the one family member I don't consider family anymore."

A strange heaviness settled between us. "That's… awful to say something like that." I said carefully

But Niskarsha didn't respond. Instead, he let the silence expand, his eyes were still fixed somewhere far beyond me, as though lost in a memory he wasn't ready to share. Then, he turned to me and said, almost casually, come on… let's go to my cabin," Niskarsha said with a faint smile.

We began walking down the quiet hallway toward his cabin when, suddenly, I saw her — and for a moment, the world around me seemed to blur. That's when I first laid my eyes on Raufleza. Her presence was impossible to ignore; there was something about her beauty that stopped me in my tracks.

I instinctively slowed down, whispering to Niskarsha, "Wait… just give me a second." My eyes remained fixed on her.

Niskarsha noticed immediately — the way my focus had shifted entirely and before I could react, he walked straight up to her. My heart skipped a beat, confusion and nervousness mixed up all at once. I could hear their conversation faintly but couldn't make out the words

After what felt like forever, Raufleza turned her head slightly, her eyes locking on mine. Then, to my surprise, she started walking toward me.

When she finally stood before me, she asked with her voice soft "So… you like me?"

I froze. Somehow, I managed to nod gently, too overwhelmed to speak.

She gave a faint smile as she whispered, "I had noticed you since the moment I got here."

And then, without hesitation, she reached out and took my hands, holding them tightly as though she had been waiting for this moment far longer than I could imagine.

At that moment, I noticed Niskarsha sitting all alone, his eyes were distant, as if lost in his own thoughts. A sudden wave of concern washed over me, and I thought of making him feel a little more comfortable. Turning to Raufleza, I said softly, "How about we all catch up over dinner later?" She replied with a smile on her face "Great idea."

From the very beginning, I had started this story with my terrible childhood, thinking it was the reason I could never relate to anyone. But to my complete surprise, Niskarsha's childhood mirrored mine almost perfectly.

I was stunned into silence for a moment, unable to process what I had just heard. As soon as we entered his cabin, he began sharing his past. My curiosity got more stronger, and I finally asked, "So… you faced a terrible situation in your teens, right?"

He simply nodded; his eyes were clouded with memories he wasn't ready to revisit. I was eager to know more, but before I could ask another question, he cut me off gently with a smile.

"Let's catch up the dinner," he said. "Your love, Ms. Raufleza, must be waiting."

I giggled, shaking my head. "Don't worry, it's not my first date. I'll be fine, mate."

"Of course," he replied.

Together, we headed toward the dining area. But as soon as we arrived, we discovered something unexpected, the entire section was divided into VIP and Non-VIP areas. And, as of luck, Raufleza was in the VIP section.

Exchanging silent eye contact, Niskarsha and I made our way toward the non-VIP area, pretending it didn't bother us though it did bother us especially me.

As we settled into our seats, I turned to him and asked softly, "Niskarsha… have you ever experienced love?"

For a moment, he didn't answer. Then, slowly, with a faint smile he replied, "As for me," he said, his voice low voice, "it's dime a dozen, mate." He paused, taking a sip of his pineapple juice before leaning back in his chair. "But… if you're talking about true love…" his tone dropped slightly "I only remember two events in my entire life."

Something about the way he said it sent a strange chill through me, like there was a story beneath those words he wasn't ready to tell.

But to my surprise he did tell me.

CHAPTER 1: "DEBUT IN LOVE"

He set the glass down gently, his eyes distant as if reaching back through the years.

"Once," he began softly, "I was affectionate with a classmate when I was in the third standard. Back then, I didn't even know what love truly was — or what it was meant to be. All I understood was what I saw around me, what I heard is people telling each other 'I love you' just because someone was beautiful or good-looking."

A faint smile across his face, but it didn't last long.

"But as time passed," he continued, his voice quieter now, "I realized that what I felt back then wasn't love at all. It was… just an adolescent affection or an illusion which I mistook for thinking something greater."

Anyways," Niskarsha continued, "I was always… suffocated in that so-called love. It felt like being trapped in a space too small to breathe, and deep down, I knew I had to let it go. I was trying my best to start over; to begin a new chapter of my life… but back then, I didn't have many people I could trust to."

He paused for a moment, as a faint nostalgia crossed his face.

"At that time," "I had only one person I could truly open my heart to — my cousin… my dearest friend back then, Prem. He was the only one who understood me without asking too many questions. With him, I didn't have to explain my anger, my confusion. He just… knew."

"Then came Tihar — the festival of lights, joy, and colorfulness," Niskarsha said, his voice carrying a warmth as if he could still see the glow of those oil lamps in his memory. "But that year… things were different for me. Due to the demise of one of my relatives, I couldn't celebrate it at home. Still, Prem wouldn't let me drown in loneliness. He insisted me to celebrate the festival with him at his place since, for the first time ever, his family had decided to host Tihar in their own home rather than traveling to their ancestral house."

He paused, with a soft smile.

"Prem's home… was practically my second home. No matter what phase of life I was in, I could walk through those doors without hesitation. And that year, I wanted to be there more than ever. I helped his family with everything I could decorating the house, preparing sweets, arranging the diyas. We were both exhausted but happy, and when evening came, Prem and I finally got ready for the puja. The house glowed under the shimmer of hundreds of tiny flames, and the laughter spilling through the corridors as guests started arriving."

Niskarsha's expressions were changed as his tone softened and says.

"That's when I saw her… Arya," he whispered, "My first serious love. When my eyes met hers, it felt like my heart skipped several beats, like it was trying to rip straight out of my chest and land right in my palms. For a second, the chaos of the festival faded the lights, the laughter, the noise — everything blurred except her. But…"

He leaned back, sighing faintly.

"…I controlled my feelings. I told myself to just go with the flow. I didn't know it then, but Arya was about to change everything."

Certainly, to sum up, our love wasn't as cinematic as the kind you find in every other cliché romance novel — it was simple and real. And honestly, how could a love that began at the age of ten be cinematic anyway? Yet, it became something unforgettable.

She was my first genuine love. I once came across a quote that said, "The more you keep falling in love, the more you'll end up missing your first one." And somehow, I understood it.

Even now, after all these years, after countless flings and moments I thought were love, she still lingers somewhere in the back of my mind. Not in the same way she used to, not with the same intensity… but still, she's there.

Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes — our love. It was the kind of love you'd live for… or die for. No matter how big the problems were, no matter what obstacles came our way, nothing could stop us from being there for each other and loving each other unconditionally.

My sort of love changed her, a girl who once laughed at the idea of love, who believed it was nothing but a foolish illusion. But with me, she transformed into someone who believed in it so deeply that she dreamed of marriage.

But somewhere along the way, something went wrong. I still can't point at the exact moment where the cracks began to form, but they did.

I once came across another quote that stayed with me: "Sometimes, you fall in love with the same person twice and the second time… it's unconditional." And I guess… we never made it to the second time. We never reached that stage where love becomes unshakable, where it's no longer just about wanting each other, but needing each other.

Maybe we were too young.
Maybe we weren't ready.
Or maybe, just maybe, some stories are beautiful only because they end too soon.

After having battles against the biggest problems and crossing barriers that once felt impossible to survive, we lost to the easiest one.

"The regret I adopted that day would stay with me until my lungs give up their final breath.", Niskarsha said, his voice low and almost cracking,

Those words… they hit me like a cold wave. For a moment, I couldn't breathe. My chest felt tight.

Looking at Niskarsha, I could see something behind his calm exterior — a war he had lost long before we met. And yet, he carried it so quietly, like someone who had learned to live with a ghost no one else could see.

In that moment, I didn't know what to say. I just sat there, frozen, staring into the endless ocean beyond the deck, realizing that sometimes, the heaviest wounds are the ones that never leave scars on the skin… only on the soul.

"In the end, of this beautiful yet tragic love story, we lost a battle we were meant to fight till the very last breath." Niskarsha said softly, with his eyes fixed somewhere far beyond the horizon,

His voice cracked slightly, as he whispered,

"An alarm rang again… and our story became just another dream with a sad ending and maybe… in the next dream, we'll find a way to stay together."

Those words weren't just heavy — they were out of my league, too deep for me to hold within the walls of my chest. My throat tightened, and I felt the tears pressing against my eyes. I couldn't take it anymore…

I noticed the pineapple juice in his glass was finished, so I asked him "You… still want her to be happy, don't you?" I said it only to distract him, to pull him away from his wounds and maybe, selfishly, to stop my own tears from falling.

For a moment, he didn't answer. He just looked at me, and then… he smiled and simply replied,
"Always."

That one word… it felt like a blanket over my cold chest. It carried a kind of strength I couldn't understand, and suddenly, my tears froze.

I whispered,
"May she be happy… and blessed."

I said it with all the honesty I had, supporting the girl who once believed in my mate and loved him in a way he had probably dreamt of all his life.

But then… he replied with words that made my jaw nearly fall.

"Of course," Niskarsha said, his voice calm, almost soothing,
"She's happy… living her dream life with two adorable daughters and a husband who takes care of her better than anyone ever could."

For a moment, I just stared at him, unable to breathe, unable to think.

The weight of his words he just said should've crushed him, should've shattered his soul into pieces but they didn't. And that's when I realized something strange — something unsettling.

It didn't feel like Niskarsha was sad about losing her.
It felt like… he was genuinely happy for her.

Just then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Raufelza placing her fork down, gently wiping her hands, and getting ready to leave. My heart skipped a beat, I had

promised her that I'd be with her for dinner, and somehow, in the haze of Niskarsha's story, I had completely forgotten.

My mind was still buzzing with a thousand questions I wasn't ready to ask yet, questions about her, about his heartbreak. But there wasn't time. Not for now.

"Catch you later," I murmured under my breath as I stood, pushing my chair back in a rush.

"Hi, Raufelza," I said softly, trying to sound calm. She turned to me with that smile of hers and replied, "Oh, hi… I thought you wouldn't come."

I frowned slightly. "Why wouldn't I…" I began, but before I could finish, she interrupted, tilting her head just a little and saying,

"Because… it was sad to hear his love story, wasn't it?"

Her words froze me. I stared at her, wide-eyed, wondering how much she knew and more importantly, how she knew. Seeing my shocked expression, she laughed softly and waved her hand as if brushing away my thoughts.
"Calm down," she said gently, "I was sitting right beside you before finishing my dinner. That's how I overheard it."

I exhaled yet still unsettled. Trying to shift the mood, I managed a playful smirk and said,
"How could I miss a chance to see you?"

Raufelza got into a brighter smile, and for a moment, everything around us felt lighter.
"You know," she said softly, "you were so focused on his story… and honestly, I don't blame you. Anyone would've been distracted." Then, leaning back slightly, she added, "But at least you kept your promise and came to dinner. That… makes me happy."

And for some reason, hearing her say that warmed me more than I expected. "But honestly… I wouldn't want these things to happen to anyone," Raufelza said softly. I nodded slowly, "Alas, my mate…" I murmured, "he's been through so much. You're right, Raufelza. I just… hope the same."

But then she tilted her head slightly and, with a playful smirk the same one I had given her moments ago, she whispered,
"By 'anyone'… I meant us."

I kind of felt a strong signal she was giving me, pulling out my move I grabbed her waist she gasped but she didn't pull away. Instead, I pulled her against me, and before hesitation could ruin the moment, our lips met. Fortunately, it happened on a main lobby of under the golden chandelier t where hundreds of people pass by, so the co-captain of the cruise didn't waste a second on changing the aroma he quickly picked out a song and played "Every breathe you take" by police which was coincidently her favorite song too. After just a moment the lobby was filled with couples holding hands and dancing. Raufelza looked at me and insisted "We should join too" and of course I am not fond of dancing, when I dance, I can completely turn an environment full of love into a bizarre one but then I couldn't refuse to her. So, for the first time I tried to dance she grabbed my hand and started taking my control. It was like she was a master, and I was her puppet. I could see Niskarsha clicking us from the first floor and laughing hilariously. I gave him a laugh too and I enjoyed the moment dancing with her following her.

She looked breathtaking in that gold-and-black dress. I couldn't stop holding her close to me as the song faded. When it was about to end, I took her hand, and we started toward my cabin.

On the way we kept stopping, we paused repeatedly, exchanging soft, breathless kisses. A vase fell and broke, and few people noticed us in our way, but we hardly cared.

The moment we were inside, I shut the door slammed. My overcoat slid from my shoulders, as I kissed her—first her lips, then her neck, then the hollow of her chest. Slowly, her hands were opening the buttons of my shirt. It was, and always will be, the craziest, most perfect place I've ever made love.

A soft knock broke the quiet. Raufelza slipped into her dress while I hurried to straighten my coat and pants. When she opened the door, Niskarsha stood there. Raufelza looked at me and hurried off to her cabin, her face red. I tried to speak, but Niskarsha's eyes went straight to the crumpled bedsheet. "It's… It's just… the

wind," I said, knowing how bad it sounded and that it was the worst excuse imaginable.

He raised an eyebrow. "The wind, huh? Good thing I was guarding the hallway, or the other passengers might've had some unexpected entertainment." He smirked and added, "Those noises travelled farther than you think. And you're blaming the breeze?"

I froze, trying to remember when Raufelza had made any noise at all, but before I could answer, he giggled and said, "Mate, you might have to work on your experience you were louder than she was."

My face burned with total embarrassment. I turned away, unable to look at him.

"Forget it," Niskarsha said, clapping me on the shoulder. "We're nearly halfway to our destination. Come on—let's watch the ship march sailing through the night from the top deck." "Hurry up, mate" he said.

The night air hit me as I stepped onto the top deck. He had already reached there, and I had no idea about what ship march was. "What's a Ship March, anyway?" I asked, moving beside him.

He smiled while his eyes remained fixed on the horizon. "It's the ocean's biggest event," he said. The event starts when we reach the halfway point of our journey every ship that is traveling in this ocean meets at a single point, each ship raises its flag and lights every deck, every cabin. From miles away you can see the colors—reds, golds, deep blues—floating on the water like fireflies on jungle."

As Niskarsha explained, a soft blue glow appeared on the horizon. It was the first cruise joining the event lit up in whole blue color and a man at the top was lifting a blue flag enjoying the cold breeze of sea. From the deck below, an orchestra started singing the first lines of "Can't Help Falling in Love." Soon another ship came, glowing green, its orchestra picking up the next verse where the first one left. Then more cruise followed lighting up in white, pink, purple, each one shining bright and singing turn-wise. The dark and silent sea suddenly looked alive with color and sound.

When the fifth ship went quiet, our ship shimmered in silver. Niskarsha looked at me, smiling. "Our turn. Do you know the words?" I shook my head. And he handed me a small piece of paper. "Then sing with us." He said. Passengers around us lifted their voices as we all sung: Take my hand, take my whole life too… Soon every ship joined in with us, hundreds of lights and voices were blending into one giant song across the ocean.

A loud crack split the night with firecrackers, and fireworks lit the sky, their colors shining across the dark water. "You can go find Raufelza now," Niskarsha said, his eyes were still on the fireworks.

"Oh—is it over?" I asked. "Almost," he replied. "Now every ship's passenger lights up a sky-lamp. Couples light and send theirs up together. "Wow, t's kind of a vintage romance thing." I said with excitement around my face. He replied, "Yes, it is so, you should go now." But "What about you, mate?" I asked him, he gave me a small smile and replied, "I'll light one myself. Go on—enjoy it."

I paused, unsure, but he kept on insisting. So, I walked toward Raufelza, who was laughing with her friends beneath the glowing sky.

She noticed me walking toward her and waved her friends' goodbye before meeting me halfway. "Where's him?" she asked as soon as she reached me. I pointed toward Niskarsha, who was still standing near the railing, watching those lights. "You left him alone?" she questioned, with her tone mixed of surprise and concern.

I scratched the back of my neck and hesitantly said, "I thought maybe we could light the lamp together. You know, it's a tradition." She chuckled softly, "That's done by couples—real couples," she said teasingly, with her playful voice.

I smirked, trying to keep my cool. "Aren't we a couple?" I asked. She smiled and replied, "Look, let's not rush things. It's only been a few hours since we met." I stepped closer, my voice turning serious. "And what about what happened in the room? Wasn't that meant for couples too?" I looked into her eyes and said quietly, "I'm not joking—I love you. Honestly, I love you."

I grabbed her hands — desperate, passionate, and a little lost in frustration and possessiveness. How could I let her go? I couldn't. So, I pulled her gently, making her walk with me through the crowd.

We reached a spot where hundreds of lamps were there, without thinking twice, I picked one up and handed the vendor seventy-five dollars—I didn't even care how much it would have really cost.

Then, I turned to her, took a deep breath, and together we lit the lamp. As its flame lightened, I closed my eyes and made a wish — to have her, only her.

As soon as I opened my eyes, I saw the sky glowing with countless orange-yellow lamps floating like stars. To my right, couples stood with their eyes closed, whispering their wishes; to my left, others were sharing warm kisses.

Then I looked at Raufelza. Her eyes were fixed on me, then she asked gently, "Why me, why do you love me?"

Inside, I already knew the answer — love doesn't need a reason, it just happens — but I held that thought back. Instead, I smiled and said quietly, "Because when I'm with you, everything finally feels right."

She told, "I hope it's true then. Bye, I must catch up with my friends." But I could see her blushing hard, her cheeks whole red, and her smile were struggling to hide something.

I knew then that I had to keep trying; there was still hope.

Once she left, I made my way back to where I had left Niskarsha. To my surprise, he was lighting a lamp — but not alone. There was a girl beside him, her face was half-hidden by the scarf. I couldn't help but cough loudly and give him a playful smirk. He looked at me, and then quickly whispered something to the girl before gesturing for her to go. She nodded and walked away into the crowd.

Before I could even open my mouth to tease him, he raised his eyebrows and said, "I can explain."

CHAPTER 2: "A SIN IN LOVE"

"I told you earlier, when it comes to love, I only remember two of them. I've already told you about the first one — now, it's time for the next."

The way he said, it felt different this time — deeper, heavier, as if this story wasn't just another memory. I could feel it — this wasn't just another love story; it was a turning point in his life, maybe even the reason behind this whole journey.

It felt suspenseful; my curiosity was at its peak. I leaned closer, waiting for his next words, already knowing this story would be unlike the first.

It all began after I finished high school. While everyone else was exploring the world, visiting their dream destinations, I was just lying at home doing nothing, going nowhere. Unlike others, I had no friends to share my days with, and honestly, I still don't. So even if I wanted to go somewhere, I simply couldn't.

That's how he started his story, his voice calm but heavy. I listened carefully, wondering where it would lead and how it would end.

He took a slow breath, then continued, "After Arya and I broke up… everything just collapsed for me. Everything became blurry. The things we did together — hours we spent, moments we laughed at — they suddenly became nothing more than faint memories."

His eyes lowered, as he said

"I couldn't focus. Small frustrations swallowed me whole. Someone would say something normal, harmless, and I'd end up arguing, without even wanting to. It was like something inside me wasn't actually me."

He leaned back and began saying
"A part of me changed completely. I didn't feel like a person anymore. I felt like a body without a soul. A puppet left by its master."

Then… then what happened, mate? How did you actually come out of that? It must've taken you long?" I finally asked him, unable to hold my curiosity any longer.

He didn't answer at first. He just looked at me with a painful smirk.

"Right after that time," he began slowly, "my second cousin had just opened her private psychiatric clinic. She was a certified psychiatrist, and after all the changes in me… my parents obviously freaked out. They sent me to her immediately, hoping she could fix whatever was happening with me."

He paused, his eyes looking towards the ocean as if the waves might relieve his memory.

"And that's where I met her… the girl you saw me with just now."
He swallowed, right before taking her name

"Angelia."

Angelia was sent there because she was hallucinating, and because she was drowning in a depression far heavier than anyone else's. Apart from her, no one was truly critical. The rest of us were just carrying easily curable heartbreaks and temporary loneliness, wounds that time could heal.

He paused, then smiled faintly as he began saying,
I kept noticing her for days. She stayed within herself, untouched, unconcerned by anyone around her. She didn't try to fit in. She didn't ask for approval. And that was exactly why society labeled her abnormal.
But she wasn't. He shook his head slowly. She was just someone who chose herself first. Someone who refused to let social brats decide how much space she was allowed to take. While everyone called her sick, I found something else in her — freedom. The kind of freedom I had been missing since childhood.
She carried a dreamlike quality, a courage I had always wanted but never dared to pursue because of fear of judgment, fear of society. And that's when I realized… she wasn't abnormal or sick at all.

He looked at me, eyes steady.
"It's society that judges everyone and it's them who is truly sick."

After Arya, she was the first person I felt deeply connected to, and it happened far too quickly. Back then, Prem was the only one I truly looked up to. But when she entered

my life, something shifted. My perspective changed, slowly my happiness began to follow her shadow.

"I thought about her constantly. I watched her without noticing I was watching. When she fell and others laughed instead of helping, I felt a quiet ache inside me. When she laughed, I laughed too, without knowing why. Her emotions started to echo inside me.
I even began acting stranger at home, hoping they'd be forced to keep me longer at the clinic, just so I could see her more. Day by day, the feeling grew heavier.

He admitted softly,
"I wasn't just attached anymore. I was obsessed."

Slowly, I began finding excuses to talk to her, ways to stretch time just a little longer. I stayed there without realizing how quickly hours passed. The place I once thought would suffocate me with boredom became a space I would remember until my deathbed.

"Angelia began to replace the sadness Arya had left behind. I was no longer lonely. I wasn't restless anymore. I became softer, gentler at home, almost nave. At the clinic, I was overly careful, overly helpful, as if being good might keep her safe."

"She was still healing. With others, she stayed distant, guarded, unsure. But with me, she felt different. Slowly, she started trusting me. She found her happiness in me, and I found mine in her."

He smiled, with a fragile kind of hope in his eyes.
"Days passed. I was discharged first. Her recovery was nearly complete — ninety percent, they said — and she was about to leave a week later. We were excited, dreaming of beginning again, together, with a normal life and without being judged.

After I was discharged, everything outside felt hollow and painfully slow. Seconds stretched into days. I was no longer a patient, which meant I had no reason, no permission, to return to the medical center. Visitors weren't allowed unless they were parents or patients themselves.

With nowhere else to pour my thoughts, I went to Prem's house.

When I stood at his door and rang the bell, I didn't know what to expect. But the moment he opened it and saw me standing there in normal clothes, the way I used to dress before everything fell apart, his face lit up. He ran toward me, jumping with joy, unable to take his eyes off me.

"Mate… you're back," he said, his voice shaking with happiness. "You're finally back. Just like before."

We went inside, and his excitement didn't fade for a second. Seeing me calm, stable, filled him with relief. He talked endlessly, telling me everything that had happened in his life while I was away at the clinic.

As he shared everything with me, the emotional, the funny, even the stupid little moments, I slowly began opening too. I told him about my time at the clinic. How much I hated it at first, how trapped and miserable I felt. Then I told him about the girl I met there, how we grew closer day by day, and how that lifeless place slowly turned into the happiest space I had known in a long time.

He listened in silence. Then he blamed himself, and even his sister, Arya.

"I'm sorry for what my sister did to you," he said seriously. "I'm angry at her… but more than that, I'm angry at myself. I should never have let you two meet. I was the one who introduced you. I was so stupid." He paused, then softened. "But I'm glad you recovered. I'm glad you moved on. You deserved this, mate. You deserved the best."

His words wrapped around with warmth. For the first time, I felt truly cared for, cared for without any conditions. Even when I was in a relationship with his sister, he had always worried about me more than her. I had always been his first concern.

Suddenly, his mood flipped again, this time with excitement.
"So who's my sister-in-law?" he asked. "What's her name? Who performed this miracle?"

I laughed at first and answered, "Angelina."

The moment I told her name, he froze.

The curiosity vanished. The smile collapsed. He stared at me and asked:

"Angelina?" he whispered. "No… this can't be."

"Why not? Why not Angelina?" "What's wrong?"
Then it hit me. I laughed bitterly and looked straight at him. "Oh… I got it now. You think she's abnormal too, don't you? You think she's crazy."

My voice was mixed with anger and disappointment as I stared at him, waiting for an answer.
"I… I… I don't know what to say," he cracked, his voice shaking. He wouldn't meet my eyes.

I looked at him, my chest heavy, and said, "Then why not? I can't believe someone like you would judge her. She's helpless, dude. How can you be so insensitive?" I burst out.

"Gosh, shut up, Niskarsha. Just for once, shut up!" he snapped back, finally breaking his silence.

Then he spoke clearly, each word landing like a slap.
"Yeah. Yeah, she is crazy. And I wouldn't think twice before saying it again. She is abnormal."

"No, Prem. No… don't say that" I pleaded. "Take it back."

I stepped closer, my voice breaking. "Prem, I'm telling you — take your words back."

Before he could respond, I punched my fist into the wall beside him, the pain in my knuckles was nothing compared to what was happening inside my chest. I could feel my vision blurring.

"Prem," I shouted, my voice cracking apart, "TAKE YOUR WORDS BACK!"

"Or what?", "Or what, Niskarsha? What are you going to do next?"
He stepped closer, daring me. "Punch me then. Go on. Smack the hell out of me."

His voice rose, cruel and reckless.
"Punch me harder." Or… or are you going to lose it again? Go crazy?"

He laughed bitterly.
"Crazy like her. Abnormal like her."

"Answer me, Niskarsha,"

"SHUT UP!" I screamed. I couldn't take it anymore.

And for the first time in our entire friendship, I raised my hand against him — not for myself, but for someone else. I punched him. I smacked him. I kicked him back, not just because of how cruel he was being, but because of everything he had been throwing at me since the moment I took her name.
He couldn't sit there and face me anymore. He gave me back, twisting my arm, punching me, kicking me without holding back. In seconds, the warmth of our reunion vanished.

The place where we had laughed just moments ago, turned into a battleground. Every hit carried more than anger; it carried years of trust collapsing all at once.

The fight dragged on for nearly half an hour. Those thirty minutes felt like a knife pressed against my throat, like a bullet tearing straight through me. Every second burned.

But the pain wasn't just in my body. The pain wasn't something I couldn't name or measure. When it was over, my fists hurt, but my heart hurt far more.

He looked at me for a moment, uncertain, as if he wanted to speak, then quietly went upstairs. I thought that was it and was about to leave.

A few moments later, he returned with two coffee mugs. One read PRRIESM, the other RPIRSEHM — words only we understood, memories only we shared. Seeing them eased something inside me and somewhere down I was happy knowing that after all this happened, he still cared about me like how he had always been.

He handed one mug to me, kept the other, and sat beside me on the couch.

"You really aren't just normal or recovered anymore," he said quietly, almost smiling. "You're strong too. You really smacked the hell out of me."
I gave no reaction. That felt meaningless after everything that had happened.

Then his voice changed. This was the thing he had been holding back.

"Look," he began. "I have nothing against her. I don't think she's abnormal or crazy." He paused, swallowing hard. "But I've seen how she was before. She

destroyed my cousin Rivan's life, and I can't watch that happen to you. Not again. I just… I want you to be happy."

He leaned closer. I hadn't noticed when his eyes filled, but they were wet.

"You always wanted someone who would love you and understand you. You wanted a normal teenage life, but you never got it. Somehow you always ended up hurt, manipulated, broken." His voice cracked. Please don't let that happen again. You deserve the good things.

But I never felt she meant any harm. She was real with me. She was happiest when she was with me. My voice softened. I remember the day I had to come home for just two hours. She cried, panicked. And when I came back, she looked so alive. She hugged me, told me everything. She's changed, buddy. I know she has.

He exhaled deeply

Maybe she has, or maybe she hasn't.
Then he looked straight at me.

"But I can't take that risk. NOT WHEN IT'S YOU. Not you."

"So what do you say?" I asked, my voice barely steady. "Should I leave her?"
I paused, then shook my head slowly. "If that's what you want me to do… I'm sorry. I won't. Not this time, Prem."

"You have to, Niskarsha," he said, his voice firm but tired. "For yourself. Don't let this take over you again."

"Prem, no."

He straightened, his patience finally breaking.
"Fine. If you want it this way…" He took a breath, then looked at me with eyes that didn't blink.
"For the last time, choose. Me… or Angelia?"

The words hit me harder than any punch before. My chest tightened, aching as if my heart was tearing apart. It felt like being split in two.

I stood there, frozen. Memories kicked in me, nights spent laughing with Prem, growing up together, surviving childhood side by side. Then her face, her hands, her fear, the way she found safety in me, the way I found myself in her.

I couldn't speak. I couldn't move.
How do you choose between the person who shaped your past and the person who gave meaning to your present?

In that moment, I realized there was no right answer.
Whoever I chose, I would lose someone, and the loss would stay with me forever.

And if I had to introduce myself honestly, I am a loser — a loser who has always chosen friendship over love, every single time.
And yes, I chose my best friend.

But let me meet her one last time, I said softly. Just once. She'll be discharged tomorrow and I need to see her… once and for all.

He looked at me carefully. "Only if you promise me one thing, no getting manipulated. No getting emotional. No changing your decision."

Do you promise?

"I promise."

He nodded. Then meet her. Say what you need to say. End it. Do it for yourself.

I gave him a small smile and left.

When I had come to his house earlier, I was excited, alive, imagining a future that finally felt possible. But now, as I walked back home, something felt wrong. The road felt longer, and something inside me was getting heavier.

The sun set once again, just as we had promised each other back at the clinic. I went to meet her in a small park near my house. She was sitting alone on a bench, and I don't know why, but she looked more beautiful today, on the very day we were meant to part. An orange T-shirt, denim pants, nothing extraordinary, yet everything about her felt wholesome.

I walked toward her, gathering whatever courage I had left. She noticed me before I reached her and ran toward me, wrapping her arms around me tightly.

"We did it," she said, smiling with pure joy. "We're back in normal life now. We'll have a normal future ahead."

She pulled back and looked straight into my eyes. "Thank you," she said softly. "You helped me believe in life again. You gave meaning to it. You are the reason I found my smile, the reason I became myself again."

After hearing those words, my mind went completely blank. I stood there, silent, wondering how I could possibly begin saying what I had come here to say.

We sat on the bench she was holding my hands not letting me go. My eyes were all wet and started getting blurry. It wasn't that she would not move on, so I was sad it was that what if she think I also see her as crazy and abnormal what if she became underconfident again what if I destroy her again make her time worst again.
For me it was lake one side and cliff at another side. But I gathered every ounce of courage I had, and I hold her hands that were holding me looked at her eyes and I begin Look it's literally nothing against her I. I ... I have nothing in my mind against you, and I know that your time has been way too difficult, you have faced so many backlashes, criticisms, so my judgments you never got that teenage dream type of life everyone craves for you didn't even get normal teenage life. You never had friends, your parents failed to understand your society tagged you as outcast putting question marks on everything you did, judging you in every step. Life has been so unfair for you, you were manipulated, judged, surrounded by evil monsters with countless judgements.
But for me you are and were the coolest person ever, the person who keeps herself first even first than this so-called society who itself is sick You Here's a polished, emotionally deeper continuation, keeping your voice intact but tightening the flow and intensity. I did not make it flashy. I let it hurt quietly, the way real moments do.

We sat on the bench, her fingers wrapped tightly around mine, my eyes burned, they were getting blurry. I wasn't afraid that she wouldn't move on. I was afraid of something worse.
What if she thought I saw her the way others did?
What if, without meaning to, I broke her again?
What if I became another reason for her to doubt herself?

For me, it felt like standing between a lake on one side and a cliff on the other. Either way, something was going to drown.

I gathered whatever courage I had left. I held her hands, steadied myself, and looked into her eyes.
"Listen… it's nothing against you. Nothing at all," I said, my voice trembling. "I don't have a single bad thought about you. I know your life hasn't been kind. You've faced too much criticism, too many judgments. You never got the teenage life everyone dreams of. You never even got a normal one."

She listened without blinking.

"You didn't have friends. Your parents couldn't understand you. Society labeled you an outcast, questioned about everything you did, judged every step you took. Life was unfair to you. You were manipulated, cornered, surrounded by people who called themselves normal while tearing you apart.

I took a breath that felt too heavy to hold.

"But to me," I continued softly, "you are the coolest person I've ever known. Someone who chose herself before a society that is far more broken than it admits. You are real. You are brave. You are everything they never understood."

I smiled through the ache in my chest.

"You are perfect to me. So perfect that sometimes… I feel like you're out of my league."

But I… I need to tell you something, and I want you to listen carefully and please… don't misunderstand me.

Her expression shifted. She looked concerned and she gave a suspicious look as I finally said

"We… we can't be together."

She narrowed her eyes slightly, as if trying to understand the situation. She looked around, and she took a small step back. Then she let out a soft chuckle.

I saw it then.
How she was struggling to control her tears.

Her eyes were fighting themselves.

I couldn't bear to see her like that, yet I had no choice left. I slowly pulled my hands away from hers. As I stood up, she looked at me once more, and this time her eyes finally surrendered.

The tears fell.

She stared at me through them.

"What… what about the dreams we saw together? What about the promises you gave me? What about the future we were waiting for?"

Her voice rose, as she asked me

"ANSWER ME, NISKARSHA! Why are you quiet? Why are you leaving me?"

I couldn't say a word.

For the first time, I wasn't confused. I wasn't lost. I was guilty. I didn't have answers to her questions.

I was shattered too. I was breaking too. The pain wasn't hers alone.

She looked at me again, and she spoke

If I made a mistake, I'm sorry, not just sorry… I beg you. Please don't leave me. Stay with me. I'll fix everything, I swear. Just… don't go away.

Her voice cracked completely.

"Please, Niskarsha. I want you."

"Angelina… I'm so sorry. Not in this life but maybe in another one where I'm brave enough to stay. I have to walk away now." And I left.

She was broken—completely. And if I'm honest, so was I. But some wounds don't heal; they just stay.

I had walked some distance when the rain began to fall. As I lifted my hands to shield my face, I noticed something in my palm. Her bracelet. I stopped. Turned halfway back. For a moment, I thought of returning it to her. But I knew if I saw

her again, I wouldn't survive it. I would fall right there, without control. So, I didn't turn back.

The rain grew heavier. Beside the road, a narrow canal rushed with water. I held the bracelet she had once given me; my fingers trembled, I stared it for some time and then I let it flow with the currents of water.

It wasn't just a bracelet drifting away.
It was my hope.
My future.
My emotions.

And maybe… the truest love I would ever know.

I looked at him and came out of imagining his story in my head. Then I looked at him, "Whoa! Your life has been so traumatic, especially your love life. I am proud… proud that you are brave enough to overcome this, mate. I looked at him and said he was lost in thought, and I think this story still haunts him, a dark memory that he won't revisit.

Then I spoke again. I couldn't help but say what I was feeling.

I think Prem was a little wrong here," I said carefully. "I don't think she ever meant to hurt you. I'm not saying Prem is bad or that I'm offended by him or anything. It's just… at that time, you still had Prem. But she… she had no one. She was alone. Completely alone. You were the only person she felt safe with. And honestly, whatever her past was, I really think she had changed.

Niskarsha stayed silent for a moment. Then he replied.

I thought the same thing when Prem asked me to leave her. But Prem isn't a child. He's mature. So, I knew that if he was stopping me, there had to be some reason behind it. Some truth he wasn't telling me.

He took a breath and continued.

When I left her that day, I was crying with every step I took. It felt like each step was another tear falling from me. I was completely broken. I rushed back to Prem's place

because I wanted answers. I needed to know what he was hiding. Why he wanted me to back off from Angelina so badly?

By the time I reached Prem's house, I was soaked from the rain and emotionally drained. Tears kept rolling down my cheeks without stopping.

But when I got there, the gate was locked.

That felt strange. Prem always informed me if he was going out. I checked my phone. No messages. Nothing.

At first, I told myself it was normal. But something felt off.

Just then, I heard a neighbor walking past the house, saying, "Today is their last session. I hope everything goes well."

Confused, I moved toward the women, but they were already gone.

A few moments later, another uncle passed by with his wife. I heard him say, "May God give Sandy the strength to face whatever she's going through."

Sandy was Prem's mom.

I rushed toward the uncle before he walked away.
"Uncle," I asked nervously, "where are the people of this house?"

The uncle looked at me suspiciously.
"I'm Prem's cousin," Niskarsha quickly explained.

The uncle glanced at his wife, then back at me, and said, "What a silly question, kiddo. They're always at the hospital. Don't you know?"

"Hospital?" I felt confused.

"This whole month has been too much for Sandy," the uncle continued. "She's been in the hospital more than at home."

"But… Prem told me his parents were out of the country for business," I said, trying to confirm it.

The uncle stared at me in disbelief.
"You must be joking. You say you're his cousin and you don't even know?"

Then he said the words that destroyed everything.
"Sandy's son… your cousin Prem… is suffering from a brain and spinal cord tumor."

I froze.

It felt like the ground beneath me collapsed. Everything went blurry. My body felt weak. Nausea hit me all at once. I didn't know how to breathe, how to think, or how to stand.

The uncle spoke again, "He's admitted to Grande International Hospital. You'll find them there."

Then the words from the neighbor hit me again.

I looked at the uncle with blurry eyes.
"Uncle… what stage is it?"

The uncle looked confused for a second, then shook his head.
"This kid really doesn't know anything,"

"He's in the last stage," the uncle said. "Today is his final session… his last therapy and after today."

He paused.

My eyes filled with tears.
"Please," I begged, "finish what you're saying."

The uncle looked at me and finally said,
"After today… we'll know how much time he has left."

And then he walked away with his wife.

Then it hit me.

I stood up with whatever courage I had left. I wiped my tears with my sleeve and looked once more at his photo hanging on the gate. I turned around and ran straight toward the bus station.

When I reached there, I stood frozen, waiting. Begging the road in my head to bring the bus faster.

Seconds felt like hours. My body was shaking. I was scared. I was crying. I didn't care how many people stared at me like I had lost my mind, crying alone at a public bus stop. I only cared about one thing.
My brother.
My best friend.

Then, finally, a bus heading to the hospital arrived.

I jumped onto it without thinking. I didn't care who was watching or what they were whispering. My tears kept falling, nonstop. I kept checking my watch again and again. My heart was beating so hard it felt like it might burst out of my chest. With every passing minute, my anxiety grew heavier.

The man sitting beside me patted my shoulder, trying to show sympathy. But I didn't react. I wasn't crying for comfort. I wasn't crying for attention. I was crying from somewhere deep inside me, from a place words can't reach.

Then the conductor shouted, "Grande Hospital, anyone?"

That was it.

I rushed forward, pushing through people in my way. I knew I looked rude. I knew I made them uncomfortable. But they didn't know what I was going through.

I pulled out a hundred-rupee note and handed it to the conductor.
"Keep the change," I said, and jumped off the bus.

The hospital was still around 275 meters away.

I ran.

I ran like my life depended on it. Like someone was chasing me. People stared. People judged. But nothing could stop me.

I reached the hospital entrance, gasping for breath. The guard started checking me with the metal detector.

"Fast! Can you go fast?" I shouted.

He looked at me rudely and said, "Go."

I rushed to the reception desk.

"Prem…?" My voice shook. "Where is Prem admitted?"

They looked at me and asked calmly, "Who are you? How are you related to the patient?"

I took a deep breath, trying to control myself.
"He's my cousin."

"Oh," she said softly. "Please sign in on this tablet and fill out the information, sir."

That was it.

I lost control.

"My cousin… my brother… is lying on his deathbed," I shouted. "He might be taking his last breath right now, and you're asking me to sign a form? Can't you see me? Can't you see how broken I am?"

My voice cracked.

"It's an emergency. Please. I need to see him before he's taken into surgery. Please… I beg you."

"I'm really sorry, sir," she said softly, "but we have to complete the procedure for our records."

I sighed, signed that stupid form, filled in everything with shaking hands.

She checked the screen once and said, "He's on the 13th floor, sir."

I ran to the elevator. Of course, it was occupied. I pressed the button again and again, maybe twenty times, like that would make it come faster.

Nothing.

"Screw this," and turned toward the staircase.

I started running, taking two steps at a time, my chest burning, my legs shaking. By the time I reached the 8th floor, I heard the elevator doors opening.

I didn't think twice. I jumped inside.

In no time, I reached the 13th floor.

The doors opened.

And I saw him.

My body froze. My mind went blank. I couldn't move.

He was on a stretcher.

That moment still haunts me. It always will.

I stepped out of the elevator slowly, and he was still being pushed in a stretcher,

Then he saw me.

His eyes widened, like he had seen something he wasn't supposed to see. Something he wasn't ready for.

Then he cried.

Tears rolled down his cheeks, and he mouthed just one word at me.

"Bye, Chriss."

And then the stretcher disappeared from my sight.

I had to interrupt Niskarsha.

"Wait… who's Chriss?" I asked.

He looked at me for a second, then replied quietly, "That's my real name. The one I didn't tell you when you first asked. Chriss… that's who I really am."

For a moment, I just stared at him.

"Holy shit," I said softly. "So that's it."

He nodded.

"I get it," I told him. "Please… continue, mate. I'm all ears."

Gosh… even now, I don't know how to describe that moment.

I followed the stretcher until it disappeared from my sight. A few seconds later, the light outside the operating room turned red.

Doctors rushed out. One of them said, "We're starting the operation now," and told a nurse to call the main surgeon. She nodded and hurried away. The doors shut. Huge doors.

I stood there, frozen.

Just when I was about to move, I noticed a small light. A narrow glass opening in the wall. I leaned forward and looked through it.

I saw Prem.

He was lying there, eyes closed. Tears were still resting on his face, not even dried yet. Beside him, the machine kept beeping, tracking his heartbeat. That sound broke me.

I couldn't control myself. I pressed my forehead against the glass and cried. I bawled. That moment felt like… I hadn't stopped breathing, but something inside me had died.

Then I saw his eyelids move.

He was about to open his eyes.

I quickly bent down.

I knew if he saw me like that, he wouldn't be able to hold himself together. And I didn't want that. I wanted him to be strong. A fighter. A warrior. So, I hid.

Just then, the doctors noticed me.

They walked over, angrily. "What are you doing here?" one of them shouted. "This is a restricted area! Can't you read?"

He pointed at the sign on the wall.

My mind went blank. I lied. I said my ring had fallen and I was looking for it. I wiped my tears, mumbled a sorry, and ran away from there.

I felt so empty, so lonely, like something was slowly detaching from my life, like a part of me was about to leave forever.
I walked down slowly, very slowly, crying, my tears falling without control.

Then I saw Prem's other cousin standing with Prem's mom. I went closer, and I could tell she wasn't in her senses anymore. She had completely lost herself. Her eyes had already given up; they couldn't hold even a single tear now. She didn't care who came, who spoke, who tried to console her.

I placed my hand on her shoulder and gently hugged her. I knew how hard this must be for her, not just now, but since Prem's childhood. She had raised him alone, all by herself. Seeing her like this hurt me in a way I can't explain.

And for the first time since this incident, I felt like I should stop crying. I felt like I needed to be strong. I needed to be there for her, just like Prem had always been.

So I sat beside her and held her hands. She instantly looked at me. I tried to console her.

"Look, mom," I said softly, "whatever has happened, it has already happened. You need to be strong. Don't break like this. I know he'll be fine, trust me. Have faith in God. He isn't this cruel, he won't do this to you. Be strong, mom. When he comes back from surgery, we have to make him smile."

Then I looked at her and said, my voice shaking,
"I'm your son too. Not just your sister-in-law's son. Not just Prem's best friend. I'm your son too."

"DON'T WORRY, MOM. EVERYTHING WILL BE FINE."

She looked at me and said, "No… it won't. And that's what breaks me the most." Her voice trembled. The doctors… they told me everything, Niskarsha. Everything.

"What… what did they tell you?" I asked. "C'mon, mom, don't hide it from me. You have to tell me."

She struggled before speaking.
"They are almost certain that they can't save him. Not completely."

She paused, and my heart began to pound harder and harder.
They made it very clear before this surgery that this operation won't prolong his life.

She stopped again. My chest felt tight, like it was about to collapse. Then she looked at me. Her eyes were swollen, soaked with tears.

This surgery, she whispered, "will only tell us how much time he has left."

Those words shattered me. I suddenly remembered the man who had told me the same thing earlier. With every passing second, my heart broke further. I felt destroyed, on the verge of collapsing right there.

Then I felt her hand resting on mine.
I knew I had to be strong.

So I swallowed my emotions, held her hand tightly, and stayed there in silence, knowing I had no words that could ever comfort her.

And as I stood there, staring at the door, holding my tears back and refusing to let them fall, the red light of the surgery room finally turned green.

The doctors stepped out a few moments later. They looked at each other, and for a second, they shared a small, victorious smile. One of them removed his gloves and walked toward us.

"The surgery was successful and for now, he is stable."

Mom stood up in shock, like she had already given up all hope of Prem surviving. Without thinking, she rushed toward the operation theatre, but one of the doctors gently stopped her.

"Mrs. Sandy," he said, we need to talk to you first. Could you come to the cabin for a moment?

I couldn't process what was happening. My mind was blank. But when I looked at mom, she took a deep breath, as if she already knew this moment was coming.

I gave her a confused look. She looked back at me and said quietly,
"I know what they want to talk about… and I think you should know it too."

But mom, they called only you. Maybe it's something private or confidential. I shouldn't come.

She looked at me for a moment, then asked softly,
"Why? Aren't you my son… or are you just his best friend?"

I smirked through my tears.

She held my hand tightly.
"T'll talk to them," she said.

And together, we walked toward the cabin.

As soon as he finished saying that and he and Prem's mom walked toward the cabin, the emergency indicators of the cruise suddenly started beeping. One by one, all the lights turned red and began flickering.

The sharp sound echoed through the entire cruise, inside and out. Panic spread fast. Everyone rushed and gathered in the lobby. Niskarsha and I also hurried toward the cabin, but as the crowd grew thicker, my eyes searched for Raufelza.

She wasn't there.

My heart dropped. I remembered what she once told me while lighting the skylamp, how she had had a traumatic experience on a cruise before, and how situations like this still haunted her. I knew she must be panicking.

Without thinking twice, I looked at Niskarsha and said Mate, whatever happens, you stay right here. Right here. I'll be back.

Before he could stop me, I turned around and ran toward her cabin. I still remember Niskarsha shouting behind me, "You… where are you going? Hey! Don't go!"

But I didn't stop.

I knew I had a responsibility. A big one. So, I ignored his voice, the voice that kept calling me back.

I reached her cabin, but she wasn't there. I ran back to the place where we lit the skylamp. She wasn't there either.

By then, the cruise announcement was echoing loudly, again and again, telling everyone to gather in the lobby immediately, warning that it could be risky to stay alone.

I searched everywhere. Every room. Every cabin. Even the VIP sections. I checked the back door of the cruise, the engine area, places I wasn't even supposed to be in. Nothing. No sign of her anywhere.

I thought maybe she had heard the announcement and gone to the lobby. So I decided to go back to where I had left Niskarsha.

As I was walking, I heard something. Heavy breathing. Uneven, anxious, the kind of sound you can't ignore. It was coming from the ladies' restroom.

At first, I tried to walk past it. I told myself to focus and get back. But then another thought hit me. What if someone needed help?

I hesitated. What if someone was inside and I disturbed them? But then I thought, who would even care about privacy in a situation like this?

I slowly stepped inside.

The same heavy breathing came from the corner-most stall. I knocked. Once. Twice. Five times. No response. The breathing didn't stop.

With my heart pounding, I opened the door just a little.

It was Raufelza.

Her eyes were soaked with tears. She was crouched in the corner, her hands pressed against her ear, shrinking into herself, shaking, completely lost.

She was just… there.

"Hey… hey, don't worry. I'm here," I whispered, pulling her into my arms. "You're safe. I've got you. Nothing's going to happen."

I held her close, wrapping her in warmth, trying to make her feel protected, trying to make her breathe again.

She clutched my hand tightly, swallowed hard, and looked up at me. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she whispered, "Thank you. I really thought I was a goner. Thank you."

I shook my head gently. "No worries. I won't let anything happen to you. Not while I'm here. And even when I'm not, I'll make sure you're safe."

I lifted her onto my back and headed toward the lobby.

As we got closer, the place looked unreal. A massive crowd had gathered. Husbands shielding their wives, parents holding their children, siblings, lovers, friends. Some were crying, some were hugging, some were screaming, some were making wild predictions. It felt like a mini apocalypse. Chaos everywhere.

But my heart dropped.

I couldn't see Niskarsha.

I couldn't even reach the spot where I had left him.

I brought Raufelza to the ground, held her hand tightly, and scanned the crowd again and again.

Then I saw him.

Niskarsha was pushing through people, forcing his way forward. I waved desperately. After a few seconds, his eyes caught mine.

He ran toward us like a lost child looking for home.

And right there, all three of us collapsed into a tight, long hug. A hug filled with fear, relief, and the thankfulness of being alive. It was a great moment, a moment which I had definitely not predicted while setting off for this trip and deep down I was thankful, thankful that I somehow made to this journey and I got to know them.

hen an announcement echoed through the cruise.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please do not panic. Stay calm. Our technicians and mechanics are checking everything. For now, we advise everyone to stay together in the lobby. Please don't be anxious. As soon as our technical team confirms the situation, we will update you."

People looked at each other. No one spoke. Everyone was terrified in their own way.

Everyone… except Niskarsha.

He stood still, eyes moving, thinking. Calculating. Like he was putting pieces together in his head.

Raufelza tightened her grip on my hand. I could feel her fingers trembling. I looked at her and whispered, "Hey, don't panic. They're checking it. We're all here. You're not alone."

She looked up at me, her voice barely steady. "I don't have a good feeling about this. I'm really scared. This doesn't feel small. This doesn't feel avoidable."

The moment she said that, Niskarsha turned toward us.

His face was serious. No fear. Just certainty.

Then he said one word.

One word that still sends chills through me. A word I never imagined I'd hear in my life. Not this early. Not like this.

He looked at us and said,

"Pirates. It's them."

Hawaii isn't known only for its beautiful views or as a vacation destination. It's also known for something darker. A place where pirates still exist. A place used for smuggling and illegal activities.

"I know it's them," he said.

"How? What? When? Where?" I asked, trying to connect his words with what was happening around us. Nothing made sense.

Raufelza looked at me. Panic flooded her face. Her eyes widened, her skin turned pale, and she started sweating. She exhaled heavily, struggling to breathe.

Then the cruise announcement blasted through the speakers.

"Emergency alert. We request everyone to calmly proceed toward the back exit of the cruise and move to the other vessel using boats and ferries. Please stay calm. Do not rush. All thirty exit doors at the back are now open. Move in an organized manner. This is an emergency. There is news of pirate activity in Hawaiian waters. They are not on board yet, but there is a high risk. Please move immediately."

My heart dropped.

I looked at him, trying to understand how he knew. He looked back at me and said quietly, "See? I told you."

The moment those words sank in, everything collapsed.

People started screaming. Crying. Shouting. Some clutched their partners. Some hugged their children. Some broke down completely. Others tried to calm the ones they loved.

The cruise no longer felt like a ship.

It felt like fear and apocalypse floating in the middle of the ocean.

"Come on, let's move!" I turned toward the exit, pulling Raufelza with me.

But Niskarsha didn't move.

He just stood there.

I snapped back at him, furious. "What the hell are you doing? This isn't the time to pose. Let's go, we're running out of time!"

He looked at me and said quietly, "Not me. You go. Take Raufelza with you. Stay with her."

"What nonsense are you talking?" I yelled. "Are you even in your senses? Don't try to be a hero right now. Let's move. NISKARSHA, LET'S MOVE!"

He didn't flinch.

"You wanted to know what happened after Prem's mom and I went to the cabin, right?" he said.

"Prem—this is not the time," I said, panicking.

"When we entered the cabin," he continued, "the doctors told us Prem had only six weeks left. At most."

My heart sank just hearing it.

"All the happiness I felt moments before vanished. Completely. I tried to stay strong because somewhere… we both knew this was coming. But I wasn't ready. I was never ready."

His voice cracked.

"After a week, his mom called me to their house. I thought Prem had asked for me. I ran there. But he… he was gone."

He swallowed hard.

"I stayed with him for five days before that. Five days where we laughed harder than ever. We talked endlessly. We became closer than we ever were. And then… all of it turned to ashes."

I couldn't breathe.

"At his funeral, I stood there and watched him burn. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't bring him back."

He paused, his eyes hollow.

"After the cremation, one of his relatives handed me a half-burnt paper they found. Everything was ashes… except one word."

He looked straight at me.

'CHRISS.'

"My real name."

"That moment broke me. That name died with him that day. CHRISS died with Prem. And I never used it again."

The noise of the screaming crowd faded.

Only his words remained.

"Now," he said softly, "I've got a replacement. A replacement for Prem. And that's you."

I froze.

"Maybe God gave me another chance," he continued. "That day, I couldn't help Prem. But now… I can help you."

My chest tightened.

"The pirates haven't attacked yet," he said, "but they've already damaged the cruise. The boats and ferries are slowly getting occupied. They might be gone any moment."

He looked at me firmly.

"I want you to go. Man, you have a girl with you. Aren't you going to save her? Be with her. Protect her."

"But… I don't understand," I said.

"You will," he replied calmly. "Just trust me."

Then he smiled, just a little, and waved.

"Safe journey, mate. And… happy vacation."

And then he disappeared into the crowd.

I took a few steps toward him, calling his name, but he was already gone. This time, Raufelza was calling too.

"Niskarsha, don't go! We can go together!"

She cared about him too.

But there was no choice left.

I moved toward the boat, stood in the queue, and kept looking back, again and again, hoping he would return like he always did.

But when we reached the front, when it was finally our turn…

He still didn't show up.

We reached the other side, and after a few moments, everyone finally let out a breath of relief. Some people sat down. Some cried. Some just stared at the ocean in silence.

Raufelza kept looking back at the cruise. She didn't say a word. Neither did I. I gently placed my hand on her shoulder.

That was the first time I cried in front of her. In front of anyone. I couldn't hold it anymore. Every moment we had lived, every memory, kept replaying in my head again and again.

On our right, a crowd suddenly formed around a man. He wasn't young, not old either, just a middle-aged man. People surrounded him, asking questions. We moved closer and listened.

He began explaining what had happened.

Some of the pirate gang members had been with us since the beginning of the trip. They were never outside. They were among us, walking with us, pretending to be normal passengers.

"I didn't see their faces," the man said, "but I saw one of them from behind. I saw him place something inside the engine room."

He took a deep breath before continuing.

"I'm a mechanical engineer," he said. "I know that cruise alarms don't go off for small or minor issues. They only beep when there's serious danger. When I checked the engine midway through the journey, I found a bomb. That cruise still has a bomb inside it."

The crowd gasped.

People started shouting questions.
"Why would they place a bomb?"
"What was the reason?"
"What was the connection?"

The man raised his voice. "Where we were headed—Hawaii—is one of the major areas where pirates conduct their operations. The bomb was planted to cause destruction there. The timing of the bomb was synced with our journey."

He paused.

"If the cruise alarm hadn't gone off today," he said, "we would have reached there and died without even knowing why."

People began questioning him again.
"How do we believe you?"
"What proof do you have?"

The man looked at the crowd and said, "There was a young boy with me. He knew about this mechanism too."

Everyone looked around.
"Who?"
"Where is he?"

"I don't know his name," the man said. "But he was an IT technician."

It clicked.

I pushed through the crowd and described Niskarsha—his height, his face, his clothes. The man nodded again and again.

"Yes," he said. "That's him. He wanted to diffuse the bomb himself. But I stopped him. It was too risky."

Everything suddenly made sense.

Why he stayed.
Why he told me he had another chance to save someone.
Why he said I would understand later.

And in that moment, I did.

I then relaised he must be there to diffuse so I have to go for him I looked at raufelza she understood and she looked at me and said no need to hesitate you can go and not just you I am going too. No, he would kill me he had said me to protect you all these times repetadely so I won't risk you. She insisted no I am going with you and that's all. Don't you understand? I am going. She became furious, but I stand on what I said. I looked at her, and I begged Please be here with your girls. Please, I will catch you up. Please don't risk yourself, she looked disappointed and upset, but I was saying it for her good. As I took my hands off her and moved towards the ferry that was lying at the edge of the sea, I was about to step inside.

Boom! The cruise burst. It was full on fire, burning its particles and fragments, spreading 1000 miles away. I stood up NOO!! I screamed, screamed top of my lungs after realizing that was not a cruise, but there was my BESTFRIEND Niskarsha, who now has turned into ash, trying to save me!

Another NO!! Echoed from raufelze she was in shock too she came near me I was not in my senses I was crying screaming yelling NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO Niskarsha NO NO NO I was crying like my eyes were about to pop every one was left jaw dropping they were saying If they weren't on time they would have been a goner.

But to me, I lost everything, all the moments I passed with him, about 15 minutes ago, were now a memory, and on top of that, HE WAS NO MORE… NOT JUST WITH ME, BUT HE WAS NOT HERE IN THE WORLD.

** JUICES OF CONCLUSION **

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THE FINAL SIP

<u>THE NEXT IN THE SERIES……</u>